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Despite the waning of the Cold War, the U.S. role as global power continues. At the annual Munich Conference on Security Policy -- the Wehrkunde Conference -- the secretary of defense addresses conflicting foreign perceptions of these responsibilities.

Volume 13 Number 18

International Community Still Relies on U.S. Leadership

Remarks by Secretary of Defense William S. Cohen at the Wehrkunde Conference, Munich, Germany, Feb. 8, 1998

Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I regret that I have to depart momentarily. Since there were so many comments that were made that supported or supplemented much of what I had to say, I really don't have much to say.

But let me say that I regret having overlooked George Robertson [secretary of state for defense, United Kingdom]. He was not named, but is not unknown. He certainly is not unknown to me. We have become very close friends. After you heard his presentation, you can understand why he will continue to be a real rising star throughout Europe in terms of his influence.

I must tell you a story about George Robertson -- how he caught my attention, because it touches upon something that Sen. [Jon] Kyl said a while ago about questions raised as to whether the United States is behaving like an imperial bully. When I attended a NATO conference recently and at a Partnership for Peace luncheon, I was trying to understand the sometimes schizophrenic attitudes on the part of our European friends.

On the one hand, I have been reading stories about "America the powerful, America the bully, America the pushy," always trying to throw its weight around. I said "OK, I can understand how that can be the perception."

When we say, "Look, why don't you just handle the problem -- namely, Bosnia?"

"Oh no, no, you can't leave. That would be an abdication of your responsibility."

I was trying to articulate the frustration that some of us sometimes feel in terms of the commentary that we read from time to time about our European friends and others talking about us being bullies and perhaps being too self-inflated.

Then George Robertson said in his inimitable brogue, "Bill, you don't understand," he said. "If you can't ride two horses at once, what the hell are you doing in the circus in the first place?"

That really sort of summed it up nicely, I thought. But he really did sum up the dilemma that we face from time to time. Sen. Kyl has said that we do not purport to be, do not intend to be in any way, an imperial bully. We recognize that we have global responsibilities, and we recognize also that many countries ask us to perform this role. We are focused upon Europe at the moment.

There are other things taking place in Asia in which Europeans have a vast interest -- Germany in particular, perhaps other countries, the French, the British and others, the Italians. All those have a stake in what's taking place in Asia as well.

I recently completed a 12-day trip to Asia and what I found was the countries there are beckoning the

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United States. They welcome us. When I was in Singapore, for example, the Singaporeans are building a new pier that will be completed in 1999. They announced during my visit that they want American aircraft carriers to pay visits to Singapore. They are welcome in Singapore.

We signed a new agreement dealing with the training of our forces when they visit the Philippines. When I went to China, we had a very productive relationship in terms of my being the first American to have paid a visit to their air command control center, to sign a safety agreement with the Chinese government to be able to address the PLA's [People's Liberation Army] Academy of Sciences.

It was a unique experience for an American secretary of defense to have that opportunity to lay out our strategy for our presence in the region, the U.S. defense guidelines, our commitment to South Korea and how we believe that we provide a stabilizing influence for the entire region.

As I mentioned last night, when you have stability, you have at least the opportunity to enjoy prosperity because investment flows. Business tends to follow the flag. When they find a secure environment, they will invest; when you have investment, you have an opportunity to promote the prosperity of all the people in the region in which you can share. So we think that our presence is welcomed by many.

We do not seek to impose our presence on any, and if the day should come when a country asks us to leave, we leave. So we are not trying to occupy any territory. I mention this because there is some notion that, once again, America is trying to dominate.

With respect to the NATO enlargement, I want to reassure our Russian friends who are here from the Duma [national parliament] that this is not the case. I have taken occasion to meet with the former minister of defense, [Igor N.] Rodionov. I invited him into our talk with the Joint Chiefs of Staff where they meet on a daily basis, to receive briefings [and] to ask questions. Mr. [Yevgeniy M.] Primakov [Russian minister of foreign affairs] has been there as well. I will be meeting shortly with [current Russian Defense] Minister [Igor D.] Sergeyev in Moscow -- all in an effort to really establish the kind of personal relationships that many of us have here.

I mention this because I go back to 1984. 1984 was an important year. It was Orwell's year, as you may recall. It seemed appropriate that I would help to fashion an oxymoronic phrase known as the "nuclear build-down." I went off to Moscow to visit with the Academy of Sciences to explain this concept of how we could modernize our nuclear forces while reducing the overall limits, as well as getting the numbers down while still providing for a stable and mobile nuclear arsenal.

I was singularly unpersuasive. I did not persuade anyone at the time that this was a concept that should be endorsed or embraced, but as an incident to my going to meet with various then-Soviet officials, I went out to meet with two poets and this experience stayed with me.

I met with [Russian poets] [Yevgeni A.] Yevtushenkov and [Andrei A.] Voznesenskii. Both of them have become good friends. Each has played an important role in my life, certainly. Voznesenskii came to visit me shortly after I met him in Moscow, outside of Moscow. He came one day, it was in 1985, and he walked into my office and said he wanted a copy of "the book." I said, modestly, "Which book of mine?"

He said, "You know, the spy book." It was a novel that I had co-authored with [former] Sen. [Gary] Hart.

I said, "There's no sense in taking this book. You won't be allowed to take it back into the Soviet Union because the KGB has captured and kidnapped an American senator and taken him off to Moscow. It will never sell in Moscow, so don't even bother."

But he said, "I want something else, I want the chance to meet President [Ronald] Reagan -- just give me five minutes with President Reagan."

I said, "I can't get five minutes with President Reagan, but I'll see what I can do." So I called the White

House. I said I have an important friend -- poets enjoy a unique position in Russia. I think they still do. They command great audiences, and the people look to them for their insights and wisdom and courage over the years.

I was able to arrange a meeting between Voznesenskii and President Reagan. It was very quiet, very private, and he made a direct appeal to the president. He said it's important that we start sharing our writers, our artists, our musicians and our people so that you will have a better understanding of who we are.

President Reagan picked up on it immediately and said, "You're right!" He started an exchange program which I think has benefited both of our countries. From that one meeting, it was the beginning of a new opening that was brought to bear by this individual. I have not forgotten that experience.

The other experience I had in Moscow at that time was a meeting with Yevtushenkov. We spent the afternoon reading each other's lines and some of his novels. At the very end, when I was leaving, he said, "You and I must stay in contact; otherwise, we will forget each other's faces."

It was a very simple way of him saying that when we don't maintain this kind of contact, when we don't have the opportunity to either befriend one another or confront one another across the table, then it becomes easy to demonize the other in a time of stress. That really is the value of this conference.

The fact that we can have so many different opinions, that we can have the chancellor and the SPD [German Social Democratic Party], that we can have members from the Duma and from other countries come to this conference to express their opinions and challenge us in terms of our ideas and to probe, to find out whether there is an intellectual basis for it. That is the essence of how we can continue to make history in the most positive sense.

We should not have to live to tell those who follow behind us that, in [T.S.] Eliot's words, we have a sudden illumination, that we have the experience but we missed the meaning. All of us who have the experience during the past decades of what it means to pursue a path of peace and how that can be achieved and we should not leave it to chance or to any neglect, that we have done our very best to measure up to our responsibilities.

So I take this opportunity to say, it's a pleasure for me to be here, to be a part of [Wehrkunde Conference founder] Herr [Ewald] von Kleist's final chairing of this conference. I look forward to his successor following in very large footsteps.

Perhaps I can refer to one final poet: W.H. Auden. He said that history is a great tide that never sleeps or rests and, held one moment, burns the hand. I think we should always keep that in mind as we look back upon what the 20th century has meant and what we hope the 21st century will mean. That we can, in fact, not simply have a repetition of what has taken place in the past, that the past not necessarily be only prologue, that we learn from our mistakes and really commit ourselves to a much better future.

Thank you very much.

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